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THE PENINSULA

Enigmatic Foreign Ministry Article Accuses U.S. of “Sinister Political Purpose” in Providing Humanitarian Aid

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Author: [Robert King](#)

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Earlier this week, the North Korean Foreign Ministry released [an article](#) entitled “‘Humanitarian Aid’ Should Not Be Abused For Sinister Political Purpose.” The article was given wide circulation—released by the Foreign Ministry and also the official press agency KCNA. In a country where the media is rigidly controlled by the regime, the release of such

What makes this article “curiouser and curiouser” (to quote Lewis Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland) is the fact that it was written by a “Senior Researcher,” Kang Hyon Chol, at the Association for the Promotion of International Economic and Technological Exchange—a Foreign Ministry agency for dealing with the mechanics of international assistance, but not a high-level policy-making body. This was not a senior government official, but the way the article was released by the Foreign Ministry and KCNA clearly indicates that it is a significant statement of official policy that deserves attention.

The article is a review of U.S. aid policies based on a study of the text of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 (including at least some of the subsequent amendments to the legislation). The author comes to the hardly surprising conclusion that security, economic development, and humanitarian assistance are provided by the United States in order to further its national objectives. He never bothers to comment on those objectives, but repeatedly suggests that since they are American aims, they are hostile and evil. What he misses is that those objectives include international security and peace, stability, economic development and trade, and humanitarian wellbeing, including health. These are broad U.S. international goals, but they are not objectives that are detrimental to others. They are the same goals that most United Nations members states fully endorse.

What Does Publication of This Article Mean?

Since the consequence of making a misstatement in the North Korean media is so draconian, the publication of this article in English is not just an indication that it was a slow news day and this was included as filler. There is a purpose behind the appearance of this article. It was published to send a message, and the fact that it was published in English by the Foreign Ministry and discusses U.S. legislation on humanitarian legislation suggests that the message is intended for the United States.

North Korea is facing serious economic problems. United Nations Security Council sanctions have put the economy under considerable pressure. At a party meeting in February Kim Jong-un told the country’s leadership that the last economic plan had failed “tremendously,” and in April he warned the party leadership that the country must prepare for another “arduous march”—the phrase associated with the disastrous famine of the mid-1990s under the leadership of Jong-un’s father Kim Jong-il.

Despite expectations this spring that the border with China would reopen after being closed because of the COVID pandemic, the border was again tightened in June as bilateral trade with China once again plunged. The summer of 2020 was a period of serious drought followed by typhoon rains, and reports are now emerging of serious food

shortages, Kim Jong-un told the party leadership in June that “The people’s food situation is now getting tense,” and “It is essential for the whole party and state to concentrate on farming.”

It could very well be that the publication of the article, with wide circulation in English is an indication that Pyongyang is interested in talking with the United States about humanitarian assistance. In the past, North Korea would not necessarily soften its rhetoric towards the United States even when it was receiving U.S. aid. Since the initial expression of interest come from a low level Foreign Ministry official (or at least it appears to come from such an official) it suggests that the North Korean government is not formally making a request for aid. If the United States does not respond, there is no loss of face for the regime, particularly with the domestic audience.

Furthermore, Pyongyang is making clear up front that it is suspicious of United States intentions if discussions on food assistance do get under way. Discussion of the pros and cons of seeking aid from the U.S., as well as the possibility of successfully getting assistance, are probably under consideration right now. As the issue is discussed in Pyongyang, the message of the article internally is that the North must be very cautious about accepting aid because of the mistrust of U.S. intentions. While the article may signal an interest in help, it is also a warning to North Korean officials to be very cautious.

Issues for the U.S. in Providing Humanitarian Aid

In light of the possibility that North Korea is indeed looking for assistance—and all signs suggest this is a very real possibility—there are significant obstacles and issues to be overcome. Resolving them will not be quick or easy.

First, if the United States is to provide humanitarian aid, significant legislative requirements will have to be met. “Senior Researcher” Kang Hyon Chol did not discuss U.S. legal requirements for humanitarian aid that would have to be met by U.S. aid officials. Aid is provided on the basis of established need, the ability to monitor distribution of aid to be

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certain it reaches those most in need, and international needs have to be balanced to consider needs in multiple countries around the world. Humanitarian assistance cannot be provided for political reasons, and this will require careful attention to meet the legal requirements.

The need and the scope of humanitarian need would have to be established by on-site inspection by agricultural and food specialists. Aid distribution would have to be monitored by U.S. representatives to insure that aid reaches the intended target populations. There will be keen competition with climate difficulties creating demand for food assistance in many places around the world. These three conditions are legal requirements. U.S. Government officials will need to appear before skeptical congressional committees to justify their decision to provide aid, and they must give assurances that it was done in ways that meet the legislative criteria.

The second consideration is that U.S. personnel will need to be on the ground in North Korea to be certain that the criteria for humanitarian assistance are met. Currently the North Korean government is not allowing foreigners to enter the country because of its concern that its underfunded and fragile health care system cannot meet the challenge of a serious COVID outbreak and the COVID pandemic restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of the virus.. The country has already cancelled its participation in the Tokyo Olympics later this year because of concern with the potential impact of the pandemic. Kim Jong-un has been particularly sensitive about COVID. It remains to be seen whether there is a solution to the U.S. need to monitor humanitarian assistance distribution and the North Korea restriction on foreigners entering the country. The United States Congress would have grave concerns if monitoring would be dependent on North Korean officials.

The third problem is United Nations Security Council sanctions against the North for its nuclear and missile program. The sanctions are mandatory for all UN member states, and they are supported by China and Russia, who along with the United States, Britain and France are the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. The sanctions are not intended to limit humanitarian aid, but there are concerns to be certain that aid does not become a loophole for violating the sanctions against nuclear and missile programs. This would probably be the easiest of the problems to resolve.

Private Humanitarian Aid

Non-government assistance to North Korea has been an important part of contact between Americans and the North. In the past private organizations have played a role in distributing U.S. humanitarian aid, but a number of organizations have provided significant assistance, particularly in medical help and education programs.

Such private aid has suffered from a one-two punch. First, in 2016-2017 U.N. Security Council sanctions as well as unilateral U.S. sanctions made it increasingly difficult for American humanitarian organizations to carry out their work in the North. Near the end of the Obama administration and particularly at the beginning of the Trump administration, the U.S. made it nearly impossible for private American citizens to travel to North Korea, even if their activities were compatible with UN and U.S. sanctions.

Near the end of the Trump administration travel restrictions were eased somewhat on travel by private U.S. citizens engaged in humanitarian projects traveling to the North, but the outbreak of the COVID pandemic and the North's response, however, made it even more difficult for non-North Koreans going to the North. Diplomats of many countries have left and have not been replaced. The story of eight Russian diplomats and their effort to leave North Korea pushing their luggage and children on a hand trolley on the rail line across the Tumen River into Russia was only the most dramatic story of what diplomats had to go through simply to leave North Korea. Few, if any, diplomats have been replaced in the North in well over the last year.

Leaders of a number of humanitarian organizations continue to seek ways to provide assistance, and their commitment to help the people of the North is remarkable. At this point, however, the continuing problems of COVID and the North's paranoid response make it very difficult to anticipate progress any time soon.

“Preparing for Both Dialogue and Confrontation”

In Kim Jong-un's report to the plenary session of the Central Committee of the Workers Party in mid-June stressed “the need to get prepared for both dialogue and confrontation, especially to get fully prepared for confrontation, in order to protect the dignity of our state and its interests for independent development.”

The balance between preparing for dialogue or confrontation was not clear. The North has never been transparent about its policy direction, and that is a key part of Kim's tactics.

This time, however, it appears that current events have not been particularly favorable to Pyongyang. Conditions are apparently now more difficult than they have been at any time in the last quarter century. References in Kim Jong-un's report to the Central Committee to the "Arduous March" were not lost on any North Koreans who remember the starvation of the 1990s famine years. There is a certain risk even to invoking that memory, and the fact

that it was done suggests the concern and urgency Kim feels. Conditions in the North are certainly more difficult than they have been at any time in the ten years since Kim Jong-un came to power after the death of his father in 2011.

There may be an opportunity to return to talks between the Washington and Pyongyang, but clearly we are not there yet. This latest article from the Foreign Ministry on U.S. humanitarian assistance—despite the discussion of the "sinister political purpose" of such aid—may be a first cautious outreach that could eventually lead to resuming humanitarian aid discussions with North Korea. And this could also eventually lead with many "fits and starts" to cautious and careful discussion of nuclear and political issues.

Robert R. King is a Non-Resident Fellow at the Korea Economic Institute of America. He is former U.S. Special Envoy for North Korea Human Rights (2009-2017). The views expressed here are his own.

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Return to the Peninsula